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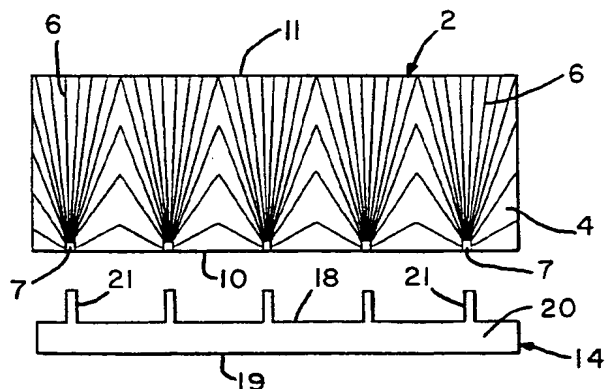
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Photovoltaic cell interconnect.

Module (30) of interconnected rectangular photovoltaic cells (2) comprises strip (14) for connecting cells (2) into series strings. The strip (14) comprises tabs (21) spaced as collector pads (7) on a cell (2) to facilitate connection thereto and a bus portion (20) for connection to the opposite surface (8) of an adjacent cell (2'). The strip (14) is coated on both sides with dielectric lamina (26, 27) to prevent short circuiting between opposite surfaces (4, 8) of the same cell (2) when cell spacing is extremely close. Apparatus and method for automated manufacture of cell arrays employing this interconnect are also disclosed.



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PHOTOVOLTAIC CELL INTERCONNECT

The present invention relates to an interconnecting system for photovoltaic cells in a power generating module of the type comprising a plurality of elongate photovoltaic cells. Each cell has a light-receiving first surface and an opposed second surface bounded by parallel opposed elongate first and second edges, the first edge of at least one cell being proximate to the second edge of an adjacent cell. The first surface has a plurality of current collection grids each having a collector pad adjacent the first edge, the pads having a uniform spacing. The cell has electrical connecting means between said collector pads and the second surface of the adjacent cell.

Photovoltaic cells are silicon-base crystal wafers which produce a voltage drop between opposite surfaces when light strikes one of the surfaces, which surface has a current collecting grid thereon. Cells are interconnected into series strips by electrically interconnecting a collector pad on the grid to the opposite surface of the adjacent cell in the strip. Thus a desired voltage may be generated by series interconnecting a predetermined number of cells into a string, and a desired current may be produced by parallel interconnecting the assembled strings. The strings are assembled on a dielectric surface to form a module to facilitate handling and assembly into an array of modules for generating useful amounts of electrical power.

Rectangular wafers are presently undergoing considerable development due to their optimal usage of module area by eliminating the voids between cells of circular and semicircular shape. Further, rectangular cells are more easily manufactured than other shapes since they may be formed by laser cutting a single crystal ribbon. The elongate rectangular cells thus

formed are provided with a plurality of side-by-side current collector grids on one surface thereof, and the grids each have a collector pad adjacent one edge of the cell. These are electrically connected to the opposite surface of the adjacent cell in the string by individual leads which are
5 soldered or, more recently, ultrasonically bonded. Soldering of individual connecting leads in the form of wire or foil strips is quite time consuming, which thus adds to the cost of a module. Ultrasonic bonding of foil is more readily adapted to automation, but precludes the possibility of using an insulated connecting lead which would prevent shorting of the lead
10 against the edge of a cell.

U.S. Patent No. 4,019,924 discloses an interconnecting system for photovoltaic cells wherein the electrical connecting means is as described in the first paragraph and comprises individual foil strips each having a
15 lamina of dielectric material on each surface, and bendable tabs with an exposed part of said metal foil which is folded over for electrical connection to the pad on the first surface of the cell. The foil is also exposed for electrical connection to the second surface of an adjacent cell. Electrical connections are accomplished by soldering or using electrically conductive cement, and the system suffers the disadvantage that it cannot
20 readily be automated.

The solar cell interconnect system of the present invention is characterized in that the interconnecting means comprises a strip of metal foil having opposed first and second surfaces and parallel opposed first and second edges. The strip has tabs extending normally of said first
25 edge, the tabs having the same uniform spacing as the collector pads on the cell. The first surface of each tab has a contact portion in electrical contact with a respective collector pad of said at least one cell, the second surface of the strip having a contact portion proximate to each said tab in contact with the second surface of the adjacent cell.

The solar cell interconnect system of the present invention can also be described as a strip of metal foil having a bus section with tabs
30 extending from one edge thereof. The spacing of the tabs is uniform and corresponds with the spacing of the collector pads on the surface adjacent the edge of a photovoltaic cell. One surface of the tabs is electrically
35 connected to respective pads while the opposite surface of the strip is

electrically connected to the adjacent cell on the surface opposite the grid. The strip is preferably a thin (.001 inch) copper foil with an insulating laminate on both sides thereof. Electrical connection between adjacent cells is achieved by electron beam welding, which provides temperatures high
5 enough to disintegrate the insulation while locally melting the foil to form the welds. The foil is fed from a reel in an automated procedure for interconnecting adjacent cells to form the series strings on a panel.

The present invention thus provides a cell-to-cell interconnect system for rectangular photovoltaic cells which means lends itself to a relatively
10 low cost automated connecting process, while providing insulated interconnect means for adjacent photovoltaic cells to prevent short-circuiting.

The achievement of these and other advantages will be apparent upon examining the drawings and description which follow.

15 FIGURE 1 is a plan view of half a solar cell and interconnecting strip.

FIGURE 2 is a plan view of two connected solar cells.

FIGURE 3 is a plan view of a finished solar panel.

FIGURE 4 is an end view of two connected cells.

20 FIGURE 5 is an enlarged sectional view of the tab on a connector strip against the pad on a collector grid prior to welding.

FIGURE 6 is an enlarged sectional view of the tab on a connector strip against the pad on a collector strip after welding.

FIGURE 7 is a perspective of the automated interconnect apparatus.

25 FIGURE 8A is a diagrammatic end view prior to connector strip feed.

FIGURE 8B shows the clamp as it advances to clamp the connector strip.

FIGURE 8C shows the clamp as it returns to position the strip over the feed platform.

30 FIGURE 8D shows the strip positioned between the upper and lower hold down plates.

FIGURE 9A is a side view taken along line 9A-9A of Figure 8C.

FIGURE 9B is a side view showing the upper hold down plate in position as the pusher places the solar cell.

FIGURE 10 is a partial plan view of the bottom hold down plate taken along line 10-10 of Figure 9B.

FIGURE 11 is a side sectional view of the apparatus as the interconnect strip is welded.

5 FIGURE 12 is a cut away plan taken along line 12-12 of Figure 11 showing the strip with several tabs welded to the solar cell.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Figure 1 depicts half of a typical 10 cm by 2 cm rectangular photovoltaic cell at two times actual size. Each cell has a total of ten
10 current collecting grids 6 on the first surface 4 thereof; each grid 6 comprises a fan-shaped array of fine conductors which irradiate from a current collector pad 7 adjacent a first edge 10 of the cell 2 toward a second edge 11. A connector strip 14 is used to connect each cell 2 to an adjacent cell; each strip 14 has bus portion 20 bounded by first and
15 second edges 18 and 19 respectively and a plurality of tabs 21 extending from first edge 18. The tabs 21 are uniformly spaced at the same spacing as the pads 7 to which they are to be connected.

Figure 2 shows two photovoltaic cells 2 as interconnected by a connector strip 14, the first edge 10 of one cell is aligned with a second
20 edge 11 of an adjacent cell 2' and the tabs 21 are connected to the pads 7 at first contact points 22 (denoted +). The connector strips 14 are folded lengthwise to a "Z" configuration (Figure 4) and the bus portion 20 is connected to the adjacent cell 2' at second contact points 23 on the surface opposite first surface 4. The cell 2' is then connected to the next
25 adjacent cell to form a series connected string of cells.

Figure 3 depicts four series strings 32 mounted on a dielectric base 31 to form a typical module 30. The cells are connected in series strings of forty-eight cells each (twenty-four are shown here for simplicity) and four strings are connected in parallel by buses 34, 35 to form a module of
30 192 cells developing a peak power output of 65 watts per module. Each cell develops a peak current of .76 amps and experiences a voltage drop of .45 volts; each module 30 has a voltage drop of 22 volts. The modules are generally connected in parallel and are used to charge a bank of batteries; for simplicity, only one module 30 and one battery 36 are shown.

Figure 4 is an end view of the connection between the two cells, 2, 2'. Each cell is about .006 inches (.15 mm) thick and has a first surface 4 and a second or opposed surface 8. The first edge 10 of cell 2 is about 1 mm (.04 inch) from the second edge 11 of cell 2'. The foil connector strip 14 has a first surface 16 and a second surface 17. The tabs 21 are connected to cell 2 at contact point 22 and the bus 20 is connected to cell 2' at contact points 23.

Figure 5 is a detailed view of the tab 21 and the part of cell 2 proximate first end 10 prior to making electrical connection. The connector strip 14 comprises a piece of copper foil .001 inch thick which is laminated on opposed surfaces with phenolic resin, about .001 inch thick on each surface. The resin coatings are denoted as first and second lamina 26, 27 and form the first and second surfaces 16, 17 respectively of the connector strip 14. The cell 2 has the collector pad 7 bonded to first surface 4, and the first lamina 26 is placed against the collector pad prior to making electrical connection. Each tab 21 is likewise placed against a pad 7, as the tabs 21 and pads 7 share the same uniform spacing along the edge 10 of cell 2.

Figure 6 is a detailed view of the tab 21 and collector pad 7 after first contact portion 22 has been formed. The contact portion 22 is formed by electron beam welding; the high energy of the beam is sufficient to disintegrate the lamina 26, 27 and melt the copper foil 25 to form a weld between the foil 25 and the pad 7. The welding apparatus is programmed to direct the beam to successive tabs 21 until all tabs of a strip 14 are welded to the pads 7 on a grid. The second surface 17 of the strip 14 is likewise welded to the second surface 8 of the adjacent cell 2' by directing the electron beam against the bus portion 20 to disintegrate the second lamina 17 (Figures 4, 5 and 6) and form second contact portions 23.

Figure 7 is a diagrammatic perspective of an apparatus for automating the manufacture of solar modules. Cells 2 are loaded in a magazine 52 mounted on a feed platform 44. A pusher member 54 is intermittently actuated by an air cylinder through shaft 55 to push a cell 2 from magazine 52 through guide tunnel 48. Connector strips 14 (not shown) are provided in the form of continuous strip 12 from reel 13; rotary shear dies 92, 97 (driven by a motor not shown) profile the strip with tabs 21.

Strip 12 is drawn by clamp 86, which is timed with the dies 92, 94, through a drag mechanism 88 to position it over platform 44. Upper clamp 75 is fixed to air cylinder shaft 80 by bracket 79; the clamp 75 moves vertically to clamp a portion of strip 12 against a cell 2. Shear blades 81, 82 on opposite ends of clamp 75 simultaneously shear a portion of continuous strip 12. An upper electron beam welder is programmed to weld tabs 21 to pads 7 on a cell 2 by projecting an electron beam through aperture 45. Lower clamp 65 is fixed to air cylinder shaft 70 by bracket 69 and moves into aperture 45 to clamp a portion of the strip 12 against a cell 2. A lower electron beam welder is programmed to weld the bus portion 20 to the second surface 8 (Figure 4) of the next cell 2 by projecting an electron beam through aperture 66. Electron beam welders are not shown but are well known. These are situated about 0.5 inch from the platform 14, the short distance being desirable so that the welding operation can be performed in a low vacuum environment. Note that for purposes of clarity the lower clamp 65 and upper clamp 75 are shown considerably further from the platform 44 than in the actual apparatus. The vertical movement of clamps 65, 75 is actually only as much as necessary to clamp strip 14, and thus does not interfere with the close spacing of the electron beam welders. After welding, interconnected cells are then drawn through lateral guides 49 and off of platform 44 between lower belt 61 and upper belt 63. The belts 61, 63 are carried by rollers 60, 62 respectively which are driven intermittently by stepping motor 58. Finished strings of cells are removed from the belts 61, 63 at the downstream end thereof.

Figures 8A through 8D depict the sequence of operations in feeding strip 12. Figure 8A corresponds to Figure 7 and shows the clamps 65, 75 in the open position. The clamp 86 and drag mechanism 88 are shown elevated slightly above platform 44 to facilitate illustration. In actuality, these would be located forward of the clamps 65, 75 and moved laterally to place the strip 12 prior to shearing. Figure 8B shows the clamp 86 as it advances to abut drag mechanism 88 and clamp the leading end of strip 12; Figure 8C shows the clamp 86 as it retreats to position a portion of strip 12 over cell 2. In Figure 8D, the clamp 86 and drag mechanism 88 have moved down to place a portion of the strip 12 against cell 2 and the upper

clamp 75 has moved down to shear connector 14 from continuous strip 12 and clamp the strip 14 against cell 2. The lower clamp 65 is shown in aperture 45 of the feed platform 44.

5 Figures 9A and 9B detail the operation of clamps 65, 75 and the advance of cells 2. Figure 9A shows the strip 14 positioned with tabs 21 against cell 2. Figure 9B shows the upper clamp 75 as it moves down to clamp the tabs 21 against cell 2. The stop 83 serves to deflect the bus portion 20 into aperture 45 and immediately thereafter the pusher 54 advances the next cell 2' until it abuts stop 83 as shown. Figure 10 is a
10 partial plan view of the clamp 65 showing windows 67 therethrough which are separated by dividers 68.

 Figure 11 is the next step in sequence after Figure 9B and shows the bottom clamp 65 advanced upwardly into aperture 45 to clamp the bus portion 20 of strip 14 against the next advanced cell 2'. At this time the
15 electron beam welders project electron beams 40, 42 which fuse the strip 14 to cells 2, 2'. Figure 12 depicts the tabs 21 after welding to a cell 2; the welder is programmed so that the beam follows the outline of each tab 21. The bus portion 20 is spot welded at several points adjacent to each tab 21 by electron beam 42. The dividers 68 (Figures 9 and 10) and 78
20 are extremely low in profile so as not to interfere with the electron beams; clamping arrangements without dividers are also possible. Note that only low vacuum is required for the instant welding operation since the energies required to melt the .001 in foil are quite low, and dispersion in the air of a partial vacuum is thus not a significant hindrance.

CLAIMS:

1. A photovoltaic generating module (30) of the type comprising a plurality of elongate photovoltaic cells (2), each said cell (2) having a light-receiving first surface (4) and an opposed second surface (8), said surfaces (4, 8) being bounded by parallel opposed elongate first and second edges (10, 11), said first edge (10) of at least one cell (2) being proximate to the second edge (11) of an adjacent cell (2'), said first surface (4) having a plurality of current collection grids (6) thereon, each grid (6) having a collector pad (7) adjacent said first edge (10), said pads (7) having a uniform spacing, said at least one cell (2) having electrical connecting means between said collector pads (7) and the second surface (8) of said adjacent cell (2'), characterized in that said interconnecting means comprises a strip (14) of metal foil (25) having opposed first and second surfaces (16, 17) and parallel opposed first and second edges (18, 19), said strip having tabs (21) extending normally of said first edge (10), said tabs (21) having a like uniform spacing, said first surface (16) of each said tab (21) having a contact portion (22) in electrical contact with a respective collector pad (7) of at least one cell (2), said second surface (17) of said strip (14) having a contact portion (23) proximate to each said tab (21) in contact with said second surface (8) of said adjacent cell (2').
2. A module (30) as in claim 1 characterized in that said contact portions (22, 23) are welded to said collector pads (7) and said second surface (8).
3. A module (30) as in claim 2 characterized in that said contact portions (22, 23) are electron beam welded to said collector pads (7) and said second surface (8).
4. A module (30) as in claim 2 characterized in that said foil (25) is electrically insulated on each said surface (16, 17) by a lamina (26, 27) of dielectric material, said lamina (26, 27) being burned through at said contact portions (22, 23) whereby electrical contact is effected.
5. A module (30) as in claim 4 characterized in that each said lamina (26, 27) is a coating of phenolic resin.
6. A module (30) as in claim 1 characterized in that said foil (25) is about .001 inch thick.

7. A method for interconnecting individual elongate photovoltaic cells (2), each said cell (2) having a light-receiving first surface (16) and an opposed second surface (17), said surfaces (16, 17) being bounded by parallel opposed elongate first and second edges (10, 11), said first surface (4) having a plurality of current collection grids (6), each grid (6) having a collector pad (7) adjacent said first edge (10), said pads having a uniform spacing, said method being characterized by the following steps:

providing a strip (14) of metal foil (25) having opposed first and second surfaces (16, 17) and parallel opposed first and second edges (18, 19), said strip (14) having tabs (21) at a like uniform spacing extending normally of said first edge (18),

aligning said first edge (18) of said strip (14) of foil (25) adjacent said first edge (10) of one of said cells (2), said first surface (16) of each of said tabs (21) being aligned against a respective collector pads (7),

electron beam welding said tabs (21) to said collector pads (7),

aligning the second edge (11) of another cell (2') adjacent said first edge (10) of said one of said cells (2), said second surface (17) of said strip (14) being aligned against said second surface (8) of said cell (2'), said second edge (19) of said strip overlapping said first edge (10) of said another cell (2'),

electron beam welding said second surface (17) of said strip (14) to said second surface (17) of said another cell (2'), said strip (14) being welded at at least one point (23) proximate to each of said tabs (21).

